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ABSTRACT

Australian Literature, in spite of the cultural and creative handicaps imposed on a developing country, is becoming accepted on the international literary scene. Contemporary novels and drama have imaginatively combined characteristic Australian themes and myths with European artistic traditions, while poetry has shown a concern with universal qualities, producing an art without parochial boundaries. Because of these reasons and Australian literature's reflection of national life and problems, the teaching of both Australian and English literatures in Australian secondary schools would result in a study of modern literature which is relevant and stimulating for the Australian student. The work of the secondary school literature teacher is of crucial importance, for if a student is given a good foundation in literature at this level, he is likely to return to literature in adult life. [Not available in hard copy due to marginal legibility of original document.] (JM)

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Contemporary Australian Literature (and its Teaching)

By Dr. Clement Semmler
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As once said by a much more skilful speaker than I can pretend to be, I fear that it will avail me little to plead the largeness of my design as an excuse for the imperfect execution of its particulars. But I think you will agree that contemporary Australian literature could hardly be traversed in three quarters of an hour and I wouldn't wish to bore you with hasty itemizations and categories. What I would like to do instead is to make some general comments about the state of our literature at present and then, mindful of my audience, offer some thoughts on its teaching.

Perhaps I could begin with a small incident that has some bearing on all this. In the early part of last year I spent a short time at Cambridge University and one evening I was the dinner guest of Muriel Bradbrook, one of the two Professors of English at this University, and Mistress of Girton College. Professor Bradbrook is a world authority on Shakespearian drama and criticism, and perhaps some of those present here may have heard her lecture when she was in Adelaide in 1967. Also at this dinner were several of Cambridge's leading English Dons and during the evening a discussion started about who might be regarded at the present time as the three best novelists writing in English. The names eventually agreed upon, not necessarily in order of merit, were Angus Wilson, Saul Bellow and Patrick White — an Englishman, an American and an Australian.

I'm not putting this forward as a final judgement. I would have been inclined personally to argue the claims of Nabokov for inclusion in such a list; others might argue for Iris Murdoch. But still, it has its significance — and international recognition is a reasonable criterion of a country's literary coming of age, as it were. Christina Stead, who attended Sydney Teachers' College as a girl, has been an Australian expatriate since 1932 and has won world-wide acclaim for a string of fine novels including **The Man Who Loved Children,** hailed in some quarters as one of the best novels of a decade.

Now even with these two examples of what we might call cosmopolitan acceptance — we should be conscious of a very remarkable achievement in two hundred years of our literature. I won't dwell on what is obvious — the painful development of any sort of cultural achievement in the early years of our country when a convict and illiterate peasant class had to be assimilated, a harsh environment conquered, an economic disruption through gold rushes and later, paralysing strikes, sorted out, and political stability and unification achieved. All that, meant, I think, that our literature had a hundred years' handicap. But there was also a creative handicap. In the background of Australian consciousness, as Professor James McAuley once remarked, there lurks the residue of a number of myths. The Great South Land was to be a revival of the Golden Age; here New Jerusalem was to be founded; here would prevail the Arcadian conditions in which natural man lived in primitive virtue, unperverted by the corruptions of the Old World. Here was an Antipodean Realm in which everything was upside down, the reverse of its European antecedents. These myths were carried forward into the 1890s, in radical and

social versions of a true democracy, in the aggressive Australianism of the early Bulletin, in the phrase of Joseph Furphy's "temper, democratic; bias, offensively Australian", in the religion of mateship that developed. I don't decry any of this. My own writing, such as it is, has paid full due to our early verse-writers from Charles Harpur and Adam Lindsay Gordon to Banjo Paterson and the Australian balladists, to our prose writers and novelists who found their subjects to hand, like Marcus Clarke, Price Warung, Henry Lawson and the rest. But where the achievement of our contemporary literature has crystallized hard and true is in the transmuting of some of these lurking myths by sophisticated imaginations, bringing them into play with reality. The results have been sufficiently interesting to attract overseas interest in them, shall we say, as an export product. In Patrick White's **Voss** for instance, characteristic Australian elements are developed with the artistry inherent in a highly European consciousness; Thomas Keneally's **Bring Larks and Heroes** develops a characteristic Australian historical theme but invests it with highly stylistic, one might say almost idiosyncratic writing, and with the inter-play of human emotion in the modern manner, enriched by every psychological advance from Freud to Kinsey. In the field of art Sydney Nolan gets an international acceptance, by his own particular genius of the Australian outback and the Ned Kelly legend. In drama Ray Lawler contrasted innocence and simple fantasy with hard reality, but in a peculiarly Australian context — and had a remarkable international success. None of this I believe was brought about by international curiosity — as say for Rolf Harris' didgeridoos and kangaroos to be tied down and so on, or for the platypus — but rather by that remarkable fusion of the rich traditions of the old world with the imaginative stimulus of the new.

It is the same with our poets. Now I know poetry is a much more difficult medium with which to excite overseas attention. Levels of poetic achievement often perforce have to be assessed by local standards. Yet our best and most influential poets — Judith Wright, Gwen Harewood, A. D. Hope, Vincent Buckley, and others — display distinctively Australian colouring and properties only intermittently and secondarily, if at all. They don't feel bound to Australian-ness as a restriction or an obligation. Rather, there is a concern with universal qualities — irony and satire in Hope, lyrical craftsmanship in Judith Wright, religious and metaphysical pre-occupations in Buckley, humanity and a sense of humour in Gwen Harewood. You will find this concern with the universal issues of poetry in all our younger poets. We've come through the bush country of nationalism — as interesting and stimulating and action-packed as it was (I guess first year students would still prefer "The Man From Snowy River" a hundred times over to "Westminster Bridge") and we stand now in the rich and fertile valley of literature in its most cosmopolitan and rewarding sense.

Parenthetically, I believe this is why Kenneth Slessor's poetry has worn so well, why he is still a modern poet in every sense even though he hasn't written a line of verse for twenty years or so. I remember back in the 1940s the English poet Richard Aldington noting with some satisfaction that Slessor didn't write as a "professional Aussie"; the fact is that Slessor always kept clear of a recognizable Australian environment, except when he deliberately set out, as in a poem like "Country Towns", to make poetic capital of an Australian subject — as any visiting poet might. But a poem like "Five Bells" remains now as one of the finest poems in our

language — in English literature in fact. It is an elegy which it is not absurd in the slightest to compare with "The Scholar Gypsy" or "Thyrsis" — there is a music in its dramatic, meditative, monologue to which the passing years merely give a patina of greater beauty.

Darkness comes down.

Where they so long have lain . . . .

Here is a singular triumph for Australian literature — that it matters nothing, there is no geographical, no parochial significance, in the fact that Slessor introduces Sydney Harbour and Pinchgut Island — any more than that Matthew Arnold concluded his elegy with the green bursting figs and the Chian wine of the Mediterranean. Slessor reached the universality of pure art in this poem. Just as, I may add, did Douglas Stewart with his radio verse plays "The Fire on the Snow" and "Ned Kelly", the subject matters of which were no bar whatsoever when they were broadcast in five or six countries of the world — Britain, America, Canada, South Africa — and appreciated as enthusiastically in their particular literary genre as Dylan Thomas' "Under Milk Wood".

So now one may very well ask is there any reason at all why Australian literature should not take a full and generous place in the English teaching curricula of this country. The matter has of course been well argued in recent years. Although it was written ten years ago in the literary journal **Meanjin,** Professor Vincent Buckley's essay **Towards an Australian Literature** remains one of the best summaries of the general position yet written. He pointed out that if a work was set for special study the natural assumption was that it was **important** for students to read and discuss — important for the students themselves, and not merely for the good of some abstraction we might call Australian Literature. And he came to the conclusion even then — ten years ago — that in the best Australian novels and poetry there was discernible common ground, a web of common attitudes, amounting at times to influence.

But the argument for teaching Australian literature in the secondary schools as well as in the university doesn't depend only on the fact that contemporary (or past) Australian literature qualifies as literature in the universal sense. Obviously there must be a process of selection, say as between secondary and tertiary syllabuses. You are not going to expect fourth years to read, understand and appreciate **Riders in the Chariot** or some of the more esoteric verse of James McAuley. But I would any day in the week prefer them to read Brian Penton's **Landtakers** to **Wuthering Heights;** selected verse of Judith Wright and R. D. FitzGerald seems to offer just as much interest and intelligent mental exercise as the poetry of T. S. Eliot as I see it recommended; the novels of Thea Astley offer just as much stylistic stimulation as William Golding's.

And the point is well made in a classic statement on this subject of Professor A. D. Hope some years ago:

> "There is an argument for the study of Australian literature as a separate subject . . . In the maintenance of the cultural tradition the study of English literature may have claims immensely superior to those of Australian literature. But it would be foolish to ignore the fact that our native literature has something important to contribute

in the very fact that it is native: that the civilization, the way of life and the problems of this country are our own problems and that it is through literature that a civilization expresses itself, through literature its values and its tendencies become conscious and the creative force becomes eloquent and evident. Even if it were argued that the cultural tradition of Australia is not yet a very important one, it is still true that it is very important for Australians to consider it . . . . "

There seems no valid reason to me why Australian literature should not be fully joined with English literature to be appreciated as such in our secondary schools. It can join a literature that is possibly the greatest of all literatures, possessing depth and breadth — a breadth, a variety we've come to take for granted. The fusion of Australian with English literature results in a modern literature that moves with the times and is a part of the thought of its time; it is not, like some Eastern literatures for instance, regarded as a special, unwordly and sacrosanct activity the more highly esteemed for its remoteness from the everyday, the temporal and the human. In other words our literature is a notably open and accessible literature — and depending on which State you live in, on the whole a free literature. Literature, especially in the secondary schools, has this advantage over other studies that its subject matter happens to be life — not some sub-section or specialized department of it, but the whole of it; life as it is lived and reported upon by the most sensitive, intelligent, imaginative and articulate people. When you add to this concept the advantage which can be gained by adding the best and most suitable of Australian literature, contemporary as well as past — then we have, our students have, surely the fullest outcome of other people's experience communicated to us so that we may have life and have it more abundantly.

But you will notice that I said — in the secondary schools, because I'm now going to indulge a heresy, to state perhaps I should say, an unlicensed premise while I am on licensed premises. I have seen it often written, and people have said to me many times, that if they had their time over again at a University, as art students, they would read not English but History. The argument seems that English Literature is an excellent occupation for adult minds — it's something you can build on, develop for the rest of your life, as long as you've had a solid secondary school grounding. But at tertiary level it's being turned into a theology — all adulation or damnation — a traffic in opinions, all too often gained at second hand without a reading of the texts (Parenthetically, I feel moved to observe that the use of cribs seems to me to be developing insidiously, even at secondary level, if one judges by those that are circulating in New South Wales).

Basil Willey who recently retired from the King Edward VII Professorship of English Literature at Cambridge, and whose work I'm sure many of you present are familiar with, in a recently published autobiography put forward these hazards which he sees, after a lifetime of experience, besetting English as an academic discipline:

1. It cannot provide the balanced and well-rounded humanist education that its founders dreamt of. It needs supplementing with other kinds of study — linguistic, economic, historical, scientific.

2. It's doubtful if as a discipline it provides an adequate discipline for the intellect. It leads young people to extravagances, presumptions, exhibitionism, the swallowing of other people's opinions — and all too often the serving up of pre-fabricated and pre-digested reactions which they believe to be records of Their Master's Voice.

3. Scholarship has moved in on English like an occupying army. Gone is the innocence, the garland weaving of the joy of discovering literature. There is hardly an author now, not so barricaded within double and triple walls of scholarship, editions, letters, notebooks, as to make general teaching seem imposture and profitable learning almost impossible.

4. Vast numbers at universities now read English. Why? To become finer human beings, or to get subjects to a degree, with they hope, a minimum of effort. Or to read for an Honours degree — knowing that if a First is very hard, anything below that is not so difficult.

It was put to me in one of my discussions with academics at an English University last year — admittedly they were History people — that what tertiary students need before they start passing opinions is drudgery and plenty of it. History for instance guarantees that drudgery. The young are always hot for certainties. They need study that will teach them to grow up to disbelieve in disbelief. That's true education. Historians don't fall for superstitions so easily. A proper look at the past of mankind will cure you of any faith in easy answers, or short cuts to salvation. You come to realize it's all happened before.

Now whatever validity there may be in that opinion I do believe that if a student is given the best grounding, the best teaching you can in English at secondary level — even if he doesn't continue his English studies at the university, he will find his levels later: More often perhaps than is appreciated he will read, say, Patrick White, the best in modern poetry, the English moralists, whatever you like. when he is older, when he has more understanding. He is more likely, I think, to come back to literature in adult life, than to any other reading or study.

I apologise again if this sounds like heresy. I don't mean it to be. Indeed I'm trying to underline the value, the crucial importance of the work the English teacher in the schools does, a work which deserves only to be admired and applauded. Whatever difficulties there may be in the teaching of English both at secondary and tertiary levels, I'm sure that you as practitioners are well aware of them — it would be presumptuous of me to impose strictures of any kind.

Indeed at whatever level literature is taught and will continue to be taught — in Australian schools I hope with a growing admixture of Australian literature — I don't believe there is any substitute for it. T. S. Eliot once described literary criticism as "an instinctive activity of the civilized mind" — how much more so then, how much less ambiguously so, are writing and reading, and the teaching techniques to encourage such activity. And when occasionally we experience — as I know I did even in my brief period as an English teacher — those wonderful, if infrequent moments of success, to find a senior student suddenly going off and reading for his or her own enjoyment say **Tristram Shandy** or **Such is Life** or making an effort to read **Ulysses** — much of which is hard

going is suddenly worthwhile. One is reminded then of Auden's lines about the writing of poetry is his memorial poem for Louis MacNeice — which might also be read to apply to the teaching of poetry, of literature, at a time when more and more people in a materialistic society query its usefulness.

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